

The status of the *Cisticola aberrans* subspecies *C. a. nyika* Lynes, 1930

by P. A. Clancey

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In proposing *Cisticola aberrans nyika* from the Nyika Plateau of north-western Malawi/adjacent north-eastern Zambia, Lynes (1930) demonstrated that the populations of the Lazy or Rock *Cisticola aberrans* (Smith), 1843 north of the arid mid-Limpopo river valley differed significantly from those occurring to the south of it in having a terminally patterned rather than plain tail. In Clancey (1989) it was suggested that the difference in the tails between the two groups of populations might, after further research, be found to warrant a further breakdown of the *C. aberrans* superspecies by the recognition of *nyika* as an allospecies discrete from the other two currently admitted: *C. aberrans* subsp. and *C. emini* subsp. (which includes *C. e. lurio* Vincent, 1933); see Sibley & Monroe (1990). Conclusions reached on this issue resulting from recent study of material are present below.

In Hall & Moreau (1970) the range of *C. a. nyika* is shown as terminating, in association with the Miombo woodland savanna, well to the north of the Limpopo valley and the border between the Transvaal and Zimbabwe. The more extensive material now available since Lynes' *Cisticola Review* of 1930 reveals that a subterminally spotted tail-character—the diagnostic criterion of *nyika*—is not lost to the north of the Limpopo, but persists in the population to the immediate south of the mid-Limpopo valley in the Soutpansberg Range of the northern Transvaal, including the western outlier of the Blouberg at c. 23°S. It fades out immediately further south on the Transvaal plateau, but, interestingly, is adumbrated in some specimens of *C. a. minor* examined from the Lebombo Mountains of northeastern Zululand, eastern Transvaal, Swaziland and adjacent southern Mozambique. Smithers *et al.* (1957) record that in a sample of four specimens from the Matopos Hills of southwestern Zimbabwe, on the arid periphery of the species' range in this sector, three lacked tail-spots, while the fourth had a spotted tail as in the norm of *C. a. nyika*. In a larger sample of seven Matopos Hills *C. aberrans* in the collection of the Durban Natural Science Museum all have spotted tails. All that can be deduced from the specimen evidence is that the transition from having a spotted to a plain tail is not as sharply delineated as first believed, but is widely and irregularly disposed between c. 20°30' and 23°S.

Turning to the mensural variation found in the same group of populations, reference to Table 1 will show that the birds present north of the arid mid-Limpopo (*C. a. nyika* (a)) have in the male a mean wing-length of 55.2, *versus* 57.4, and a mean tail-length of 59.7, *versus* 65.2 mm in *C. a. aberrans* of the Transvaal plateau to the south of the *Brachystegia* (Miombo) woodland savanna. In females in non-breeding dress, the mean wing-length of *nyika* (a) is 49.2, against 51.9, and tail-length 53.0 as

TABLE 1
Wing- and non-breeding tail-lengths (mm) of subspecies of *Cisticola aberrans*

Subspecies (south to north)		n	Wing mean and range	n	Tail (non-breeding) mean and range
<i>C. a. minor</i>	♂♂	21	51.07, s.d. 1.44 (49–54)	12	65.1, s.d. 2.95 (60–70.5)
	♀♀	11	46.18, s.d. 0.90 (44.5–47)	9	55.3, s.d. 2.65 (50.5–58)
<i>C. a. aberrans</i>	♂♂	12	57.4, s.d. 2.17 (54.5–61)	12	65.2, s.d. 2.07 (63–69)
	♀♀	13	51.9, s.d. 2.45 (49–55)	7	61.7, s.d. 2.15 (60–65)
<i>C. a. nyika</i> (a) south of 16°S	♂♂	14	55.2, s.d. 1.05 (52–56.5)	14	59.7, s.d. 2.54 (55–63)
	♀♀	7	49.2, s.d. 0.80 (48–50)	3	53.0 (52–54)
<i>C. a. nyika</i> (b) north of 16°S	♂♂	10	59.5, s.d. 1.54 (57.5–62)	10	62.7, s.d. 2.71 (59–67.5)
	♀♀	8	51.3, s.d. 0.99 (50.5–53)	8	56.0, s.d. 2.82 (52–59)

Note: Males of *C. a. minor* are longer winged and tailed than females and both acquire shorter tails prior to breeding (from late September); nominate *aberrans* is longer winged but not longer tailed than *minor*, except in the female which alone acquires a short nuptial tail. In contrast with these austral forms, *nyika* (a) approximates to nominate *aberrans* in wing-length, but has the tail terminally patterned and shorter in both sexes; again only the female moults in a short nuptial tail. Compared with the last, *C. a. nyika* (b) has a longer wing, the mean difference 4.3, whereas the tail is only moderately longer (mean 3.0 mm in both sexes). Males of *nyika* (b) range largest of all in the allospecies *C. aberrans*.

opposed to 61.7 mm. The size-differences exhibited by the birds on the two sides of the Limpopo valley are quite sharply defined, particularly in females, in which tail-lengths of *C. a. nyika in toto* measure 52–59 as opposed to 60–65 mm in nominate *aberrans* of the Transvaal plateau. It will also be appreciated that *nyika* itself encompasses a measure of clinal variation, being larger north of c. 16°S in association with the western Rift highlands of Malawi, declining relatively steeply southwards to 20°30'S. To the south of this, in correlation with a shift in the environment, size increases appreciably (in *C. a. aberrans*) to decline again in the southern terminal humid lowlands populations resident from the eastern Cape and Transkei and Natal and Zululand to the Lebombo Mountains (<610 m). The assumption of a partial breeding dress, which may affect both sexes, as in *C. a. minor*, or the female only in both nominate *aberrans* and *C. a. nyika*, may be associated in part with the variation in overall size (see Table 1 and comments thereto).

As shown above, the patterned *versus* unpatterned tail-character does not substantiate the viewing of the populations of *C. aberrans* to the north and south of the Limpopo valley as belonging to two allospecies of the *C. aberrans* superspecies. A comparable conclusion was arrived at in respect of the abruptly stepped transition in the case of wing- and tail-lengths differentiating *C. a. aberrans* and *C. a. nyika*, which is closely associated with the faunal barrier presented by the arid Limpopo, but is clearly of no more than subspecific significance. The bridging of the Limpopo valley by the tail-character and the subspecific rating of the size-differences confirm that *C. a. nyika* should remain part of the *C. aberrans* allospecies. Of biogeographical significance is that *nyika* lies in a

somewhat comparable state, but in this instance parapatrically, with *lurio* along the Rift of southern Malawi, which latter is a subspecies of the *C. emini* allospecies of Sibley & Monroe.

Two other taxonomic issues affecting *C. aberrans* may be dealt with in the course of this contribution. Firstly Traylor and other authors, following Lynes (1930), give the type-locality of *C. a. nyika* as the Nyika Plateau at c. 457 m (1500 ft) a.s.l. The type-specimen, however, seemingly came from the Miombo woodland apron at the level of the continental plateau at this point and not the plateau of the massif as such, which latter lies between 1737 and 2440 m. Benson *et al.* (1971), in their *Zambian* work, list only *C. njombe* from the Nyika massif, which is stated as occurring from 6300 ft (to 8000 ft (2438 m) in the eastern Malawi sector of the same montane area). *C. a. nyika* is not mentioned as occurring even at the base of the Nyika, but is listed from the Mafinga Mts, Mt Sunzu, the Muchinga Escarpment and elsewhere in eastern Zambia, and, of course, occurs at points in montane western Malawi. The type-locality should, therefore, be given as the Nyika massif at 457 m a.s.l., northwestern Malawi.

The higher altitudes of the Nyika are occupied by the sibling species *C. njombe*, described by Lynes in 1933 from near Njombe, southern Tanzania, at c. 1981 m, a denizen of bracken stands, and by *Cisticola lais semifasciata* Reichenow, 1905: Mlanje (= Lichenya Plateau), southern Malawi, and not by *C. a. nyika*. The altitudinally stratified ranges of these small cisticoline warblers are seemingly concordant with those of certain *Anthus* spp. occurring in the same general area of Africa.

The second issue to be dealt with stems from the finding of elements of three races of the Lazy *Cisticola* in the Transvaal (nominate *aberrans*, *minor* and *nyika*), which necessitates the fixing of a definite type-locality for nominate *aberrans*, currently standing as simply "interior S.Afr." (see Traylor 1986). As Dr Andrew Smith, the original collector and describer, operated mainly in the Marico district of the southwestern Transvaal during the course of his exploratory sojourn of the mid-1830s, I propose to restrict the type-locality of *Drymoica aberrans* Smith, 1843 to the Marico district, southwestern Transvaal, as being in accord with the known history of both the discovery and naming of this species.

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A new Amazonian subspecies of the Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher *Myiobius* (*Terenotriccus*) *erythrurus*

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The Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher *Myiobius erythrurus* is a tiny (wing c. 48–53 mm) tyrannid with a wide range in the Neotropics from southern Mexico to Peru and Brazil. In most of the literature this species is placed in the monotypic genus *Terenotriccus*, but Lanyon (1988) presented convincing evidence that this genus should be recombined with *Myiobius* (from which it had originally been split), and this treatment was followed in the world list of Sibley & Monroe (1990).

Carnegie Museum of Natural History holds a series of this species from the middle Rio Purús, Brazil. The ranges of subspecies given by Traylor (1979) omit this area. That of *M. e. amazonus* Zimmer is given as along the south bank of the Amazon itself, from the left bank of the Rio Purús east to the right bank of the Rio Tapajós. Traylor mentioned that *amazonus* ascends the Rio Madeira as far as the mouth of the Rio Jiparaná, but said nothing about the Rio Purús beyond its mouth on the Amazon, in spite of the fact that Gyldenstolpe (1951) had reported two specimens from Labrea, at about the same latitude on the Purús as the Jiparaná lies on the Madeira. Gyldenstolpe was unable to assign a subspecific name to his specimens, but his comparisons with 5 specimens of *M. e. amazonus* and 6 of *M. e. brunneifrons* Hellmayr, a race that occurs on the Rio Juruá some 600 km W of Labrea, make it obvious that his birds match those in the Carnegie series from localities on the Purús about 300 km downstream and about 130 km upstream from Labrea, respectively. The full range of *brunneifrons*, as given by Traylor (1979), is "eastern Peru south of the Marañon, southwestern Brazil on upper Rio Juruá and possibly southeast to upper Rio Roosevelt, and northwestern Bolivia"; if accurate, this means that the range of *brunneifrons* forms a large arc to the west and south of the Rio Purús.

As Gyldenstolpe suggested tentatively, the Rio Purús specimens cannot be assigned to any presently recognized subspecies. Although the Rio Purús population is almost encircled by *M. e. brunneifrons* and